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Sophomore Honors English

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A Day at the Beach

June 6, 1944. 6:00 AM. 1 mile off the French coast of Normandy.

The violent waves pummeled our Higgins boat incessantly, determined to bring the boxcar-like craft and its thirty passengers down. Just as we rolled off the top of one crest, another wave hammered us from the port side, covering us with salt spray. It had taken us four hours to cover the nine miles from the USS Thomas Jefferson to our current position. The closer the boat got to the shore, the more violent the roll of the craft in the surf became. Every man on the boat who had indulged in the bacon and egg breakfast offered six hours ago when the TJ anchored at midnight was regretting it. Few had managed to keep it down.

In the light of the early dawn I could look over the sides of the boat and see the scale of our invasion. Thousands of boats spread out behind us, creating an uneven metal horizon. The flashes from the Destroyers shelling the beach had acted like a strobe light earlier in the morning, providing fragmented visibility as we climbed down the cargo net from the TJ’s deck into the Higgins boat below. The continued shelling during our voyage towards land left our spirits high; there was no way anyone on shore could have survived the artillery’s assault. Adding to our hopes, Boeing B-17’s from the 101st airborne division had flown over the beach earlier, dropping bombs while P-51 Mustangs rained tracing fire down upon the German bunkers from their wing-mounted Browning machine guns. The sky above us looked like the Fourth of July times a thousand. It was going to be an easy takeover.

The front ramp to our boat cracked open under the relentless pounding of the surf, and water began flooding in. The only real protection that I had from the Germans artillery was now off my head and full of water. Less than 800 yards from the shore, the frigid water of the English Channel was rising past my ankles, and our boat was sinking. The small winches struggled against the sea, trying to pull the front ramp shut again. They suddenly cut out, leaving a small gap between the ramp and sides of the boat, and left us bailing furiously, while the engine labored against the swells. Up, down, bail, up, down, bail. Each time we went down the backside of a big swell, more water came in. Finally we were at the point where the waves broke hardest, in sight of the beach codenamed “Omaha,” one of five invasion targets.

The low, explosive sound of a Pak-43 Artillery gun thundered over the groan of our diesel engine as the Germans began returning fire. With the friendly fire from behind regularly falling short of the shore, and now the Germans on the beach joining the fray, getting any further was purely a game of luck. A barely audible whistle followed by a geyser of water erupting twenty yards away nearly sank the ship on our left as a shell hit the water. Our coxswain pushed the throttle on our Higgins boat to top speed, and we were jolted as the bottom of our boat scraped along the top of a submerged Belgian Gate, the first line of defense at Omaha’s Atlantic Wall. We had missed the mines lashed to the uprights of the gate, passing right through the center, but as the iron points of the gate smashed through the plywood propeller-cover, the shrieking sound of our propeller striking the metal told us we were still in serious trouble. Smoke from our engine began to cloud the air as we prepared to land, the gasoline smell singeing the insides of my nostrils as I struggled to breathe through the gas vapor.

Earlier than they should have, the winches began to lower the ramp. The Sergeant shouted at us to go, and before the ramp was even halfway down, German machine gun fire began to focus on the opening. From their safe position on the bluffs, the Nazi snipers began to shred the men in front of me. But still, we charged forward. The water, chest deep and ice cold pulled me down and made the hundred pounds of gear on my body feel even heavier, the tentacles of the current continually pulling my feet out from under me. I pushed forward through the tide with other GIs on my left and right, seemingly in slow motion. The German snipers continued to shoot men all around me, their bullets easily penetrating our steel helmets and thick uniforms. A quick look over my shoulder to check Nathan, one of my buddies was there, and in the background I saw a flash as another one of our Higgins boats bumped a mine, the deafening explosion sending metal and plywood bits everywhere.

In an instant reflex, I submerged my head and shoulders beneath the water to protect myself from the shrapnel. Coming up a couple seconds later, eyes stinging from the saltwater and lungs on fire from sucking in the tide and noxious gas from the destroyed engines, I scrambled and waded alongside the other troops to the shore. The sharpened logs that the Nazi’s had driven into the sand, every third one tipped with a mine, were Hitler’s wooden soldiers, attempting to halt us with their bayonets. But spaced widely apart, they proved nearly useless as the brave men around me continued surging forward, staggering over the dead and wounded in the shallow water.

Bolting over the ramp and following the lead of the other GI’s, I sprinted for shelter behind the final obstacle of the Wall; Czech Hedgehogs. The giant tetrahedrals sitting in the sand looked like a massive set of jacks that the Fascist juggernaut had left out, inviting us to play. But these toys were deadly, made of railroad tracks welded together and lashed to mines with barbed wire. A group of four, including me, squatted behind one of the Hedgehogs and prepared for the final sprint to shelter behind a dune, and bodies of our fallen comrades on either side of the obstacle provided extra cover.

Nate caught up, and we were momentarily hidden from the German bunkers on the bluffs as we hit the shingle bank, roughly 3 meters tall, where we could lie in shelter before sprinting into an open firing range. As more troops began lining the bank alongside us, Nathan began slowly working his way up the incline to the top.

“Nathan, don’t!” I shouted over the continuous gunfire from both sides. “Wait for others to go first.” But curiosity seemed to have overwhelmed his fear.

“I just wanna see where the bunkers are.” He inched ever closer to the top, crawling on his elbows with his machine gun held tight across his chest. “Just a quick look and th— .” His head snapped back, body rolling sideways, and as his body went limp the weight on the trigger of the gun he was still holding released a few rounds into the ground. Halfway rolled over, I could look into his eyes, their deep brown still holding onto a dim bit of curiosity, never knowing exactly what was over the ridge.

Alongside several hundred men, and fueled with rage, I scrambled up and over the shingles and dune, prepared to make a dash for one of the wooded valleys in the bluffs, nearly 200 yards away. The snipers and artillery gunmen now had a clear target on us, individual soldiers running for their lives. The “rat-a-tat” of their MG-42’s acted like a saw, cutting down men as we charged inland. I swung the Browning across my chest and pointed it upwards, releasing a few rounds at the top of the cliffs where the Germans were stationed, then again at the strongholds at the base of the cliffs. I hadn’t expected to hit anything, but the adrenaline rushing through my veins told me it was the right thing to do.

I shouted to the soldiers around me, my voice barely audible over all the gunfire, to follow me. I had located a foot trail used by the Germans across the sand embankment, through their scattered barbed wire and mines. For a regime so flawless and strict, this path was a major failing in their defenses. A few men sprinted ahead of me, taking the reins of our line, containing maybe twenty men. When I was nearly a third of the way across, tanks began to proceed over the slope behind us, joining our invasion. In the lead was a line of Sherman Crab tanks with heavy chains attached to a barrel on the front, spinning and striking the sand to activate the mines against its thick outer armor. We sprinted across the embankment as more of our metal-coated reinforcements crested the ridge, but not all of them made it. Some were bogged down in the wet sand and never made it onto the beach; some destroyed by the Pak-40’s, and others by the German’s Panzerfasut rocket launchers.

Still running full tilt along the path, a GI in front of me screamed in pain and toppled over. A shot from one of the Gewher 43’s had taken a chunk as big as a baseball from his left leg, and I could only imagine his pain as he lay there, unable to continue. As we ran past I shouted at him to stay down, knowing that the Germans would try and focus on more of the moving targets. Like me.

Continuing the sprint to the valley, we were only 50 yards from the opening in the bluffs. Three more men in the line were cut down, and people running through the wires and dodging in between mines were being hit by enemy gunfire. It was nearly impossible for any of us, save the man in front, to fire at the German defenses, for fear of hitting one of one of our own soldiers. So we held up the mad dash towards a gap between two Panzer IV anti-tank turrets. Perversely, we were the lucky ones to have made it as far as we did. For those of us who were still alive, we were now too close to the bluffs for the artillery to rain fire down on us from above, and the Nazis manning the beach turrets were busy picking off tanks. Crossing the empty trench, we entered into a valley on this 5-mile stretch of beach known as E-3. It had been less than a minute since I left Nathan on the bank of shingle.

I entered the mouth of the valley, took shelter behind a tree, and looked up to the bluffs. A narrow path, excavated and lined on either side with sandbags, led from our low point up to one of the German strongholds. The sixteen men left with me decided it was time to move up the slope and help to take down the fortress. I glanced back out at the beach, and further down where it jutted out I could see several troops clawing their way up the bluffs between the two most heavily-guarded points. Our path seemed like a fairly easy solution.

The slope on either side of us was steep and scattered with mines, roughly a hundred and twenty vertical feet to the Germans. Right before the top, still in the protection of the sandbags, we planned out the attack. Once I cut through the fence with wire cutters, we were to go in from behind the stronghold and take control. This meant breaking past all of the soldiers around the bunkers, and then defeating the ones inside. I moved my hand in a quick cross shape over my chest, praying before the assault headed over the edge and into chaos.

It didn’t take long for the unsuspecting Germans to react to our fire. After tossing a Mark II grenade over the fence to buy time, I had to drop to my knees and cut the horizontal rows of barbed wire in order for our troops to get through. The area around me lit up with the muzzle flashes of gunfire as the US troops attempted to stop any of the Germans form getting too close to stop our breakthrough. Pistol shots, rifle cracks, and the buzz of machine gun fire ripped the air as I cut the last wire to make a big enough opening for us to run through. The German guard troops defeated, I lobbed another grenade through the opening into one of the bunker rooms, then flattened myself to the ground and felt the air and ground shake when it detonated inside the concrete walls. The soldiers who had survived the firefight emerged from the crouched position, then ran through the opening I’d cut through the wire - and we began to rush the fortress.

There were more small bunkers within the fenced stronghold, and I went for the one closest to me. I stepped into a doorway and pressed myself against the wall, with my pistol unholstered; my machine gun would have been too hard to maneuver in the narrow halls of the bunker. I looked to the left and saw that there was just a short concrete hallway between me and the turret room where Germans were wreaking havoc on the invading forces below. As I came closer to the door, two young Germans from the 352nd infantry division emerged from the room and reached for their Lugers. I had a split second’s guilt as I lifted and fired my Colt 1911 straight to the chest of one, then the other. Before anyone else could enter the hall, I checked to see if either was still alive. The younger of the two was unconscious, but the slight tremor of the chest told me he wasn’t dead. I had 6 rounds left in the Colt, and I had absolutely no idea how many more men were in the bunker. It occurred to me that I should grab one of their guns but before I could make a move to get one, a third young man came out of the doorway and was quicker with his pistol than the other two. His gun only made it waist-high before he released a round from the Luger into my right thigh, grazing maybe a half inch into my quads. I made another chest shot with the Colt, and another adrenaline-fueled kill. The guilt had begun to build up in my chest, but I forced myself to remember that these men would kill me without a second thought, just like they killed Nathan.

Right hand on my pistol’s trigger, left hand ready to fan the hammer rapid-fire, I turned the corner into the circular room, where a Panzer turret was taking aim at one of the tanks down below. With a quick shot, I had dispatched the man controlling the cannon, and then spun on the rest of the room to realize that he was alone. I considered taking over the turret and aiming at the other Nazi Battlements, but a soft grunt behind me caught my attention. The only Nazi that had survived my takeover was moving. I whirled to see what it was, pistol up, and he looked me straight in the face, dark eyes seething with hatred for what I’d done to him and his fellow Germans.

He let out a soft grunt as he pulled on the string attached to the timer of his stielhandgranate, and he tossed the potato-masher into the room. With less than four seconds to go until it detonated, I sprinted for the quickest possible opening, which was the gap in the bunker face that the cannon poked through. I slid sideways over the concrete and dropped to the ground.

“BOOM!” The steel cylinder, packed with explosives, went off, shaking the all of the bunker and leaving a ringing in my ears that blocked out any sound from the battle around me. I got into a crouch and moved along the edge of the concrete face, circling back around to check if the Nazi had survived the explosion. He was lying on his side, with a growing pool of blood underneath him. The grenade had punched a hole in his thigh and cut a groove across the side of his shaved head. His eyes rolled up towards me, seconds ago filled with burning malice, now watering with pain. He groaned in agony. “Bitte,” he said. “Bitte.” He was asking me to put him out of his misery. “Bitte,” he gasped, then ground his teeth in agony, closing his eyes and contorting his blood-stained face in pain. I clicked the hammer on my pistol back and rested it against his forehead, but before I could pull the trigger he let out a low sigh, his breath catching in a final cough, and then went still.